

Field Report

Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area

■ 1.0 Summary

Congress established the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area in November 1996 as a partnership between all levels of government, and the private and private non-profit sectors. The Park is known locally as BHI, a National Park Area. The Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area is a conglomeration of 30 islands in the outer harbor of the Boston metropolitan area. There are six islands that are currently open for public visitation. The islands are accessed by passenger ferry service from one of three mainland access points: Long Wharf in downtown Boston; Hingham to the south; and Lynn to the north. There is no park entrance fee, but there is a charge for the ferry service. Currently there is no Visitor Center. However, all ferry service lands at George's Island where historic Fort Warren, a national historic landmark, is located. There is some interpretive information at the George's Island ferry dock, and from the dock visitors can board water shuttle service (smaller boats) to the other islands of the park area. The Park's General Management Plan is due out in spring 2000, and will outline significant changes in how the Park is accessed, including a new visitor center on the now undeveloped Spectacle Island.

In order to expand the public's access to the Park and enhance visitors' experience; the following potential Alternative Transportation System (ATS) needs have been identified for this site:

- Expanded Ferry service including more departure points, increased operating frequency, specialized routes serving only certain islands and landside facilities;
- Increased number of gateways with connections to mainland transportation facilities; Salem and Quincy are two cities with National Historic sites that have expressed an active interest in connecting their parks with the Harbor Islands;
- Improved water shuttle services including better information, more frequent service and improved coordination of ferry and water shuttle schedules;
- Improved and expanded island facilities including enhanced dock facilities and establishment of visitor information center(s) on islands;
- Achievement of ADA compliance on both boats and docks;

- Improved information regarding the availability of the resource and transportation services including signage, advertising, tie-in with Freedom Trail promotion, coordination/joint promotion with the MBTA; and
- Detailed planning studies to determine the economic viability of alternative ferry and water shuttle service configurations, as well as the desired carrying capacity on each island.

■ 2.0 Background Information

2.1 Location

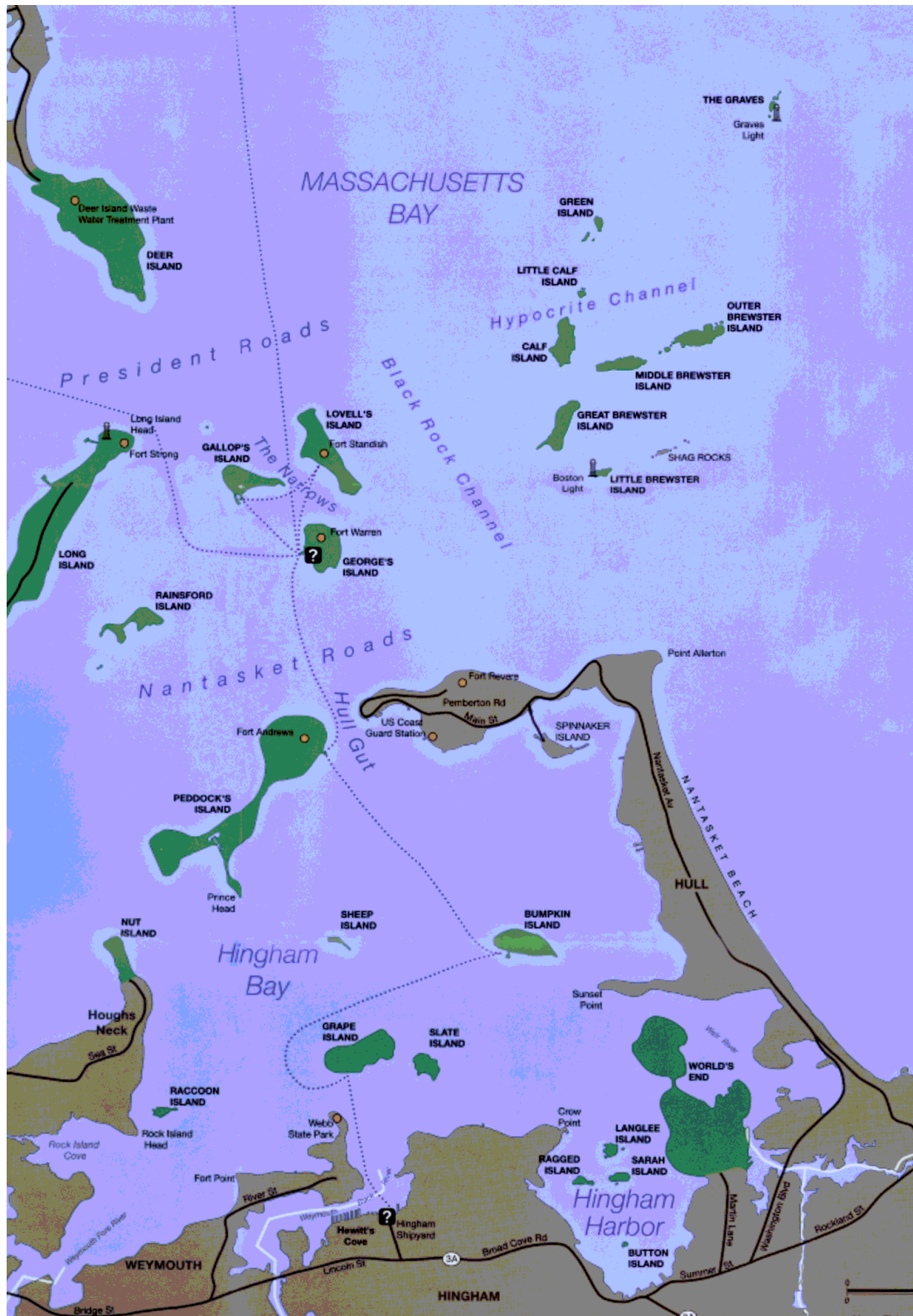
The Boston Harbor Islands are located in the harbor of Boston, Massachusetts. The Boston Metropolitan Area surrounds the park area, and access to the park area is via ferry service from three points: Long Wharf in downtown Boston, Hingham, and Lynn. Figure 1 shows the NPS brochure map of the Harbor Islands.

2.2 Administration and Classification

The Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area is managed by the Boston Harbor Islands Partnership, a 13-member board appointed by the Secretary of the Interior, representing the NPS and a broad range of other federal, state, and city agencies and private non-profit organizations. The Partnership coordinates the activities of the federal, state and local authorities and the private sector in the development and implementation of a management plan for the recreation area. Partnership members include:

- Boston Redevelopment Authority;
- City of Boston Office of Environmental Services;
- Massachusetts Department of Environmental Management;
- Island Alliance;
- Massachusetts Port Authority;
- Massachusetts Water Resources Authority;
- Metropolitan District Commission;
- NPS;
- Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center;
- The Trustees of Reservations;
- United States Coast Guard; and
- Two representatives from the Boston Harbor Islands Advisory Council.

Figure 1. Map of Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area



The 28-member Advisory Council, which was mandated by the Park's enabling legislation, advises the Partnership and provides continuity with grassroots efforts to protect the harbor and its islands. The Park's enabling legislation requires this council. The members of this council represent municipalities, environmental organizations, business and commercial interests, education, Native Americans, Boston Harbor advocates, and community groups.

The NPS owns none of the land. The only federal property is under the ownership of the Coast Guard. All other property is owned by either the city of Boston, town of Hingham, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts or the Coast Guard, with the exceptions of World's End and Thompson's Island, which are privately owned. The NPS ensures that National Park standards are upheld.

The Boston Harbor Islands federal enabling legislation specifies that for every \$1.00 that the federal government contributes to the Park, there must be \$3.00 in matching non-federal funds from the state, local, and/or private sector partners.

The partnership is made up of several committees including Operations (which is working on the visitation numbers and a user survey), Planning (working on the General Management Plan), Finance and Legislation, Marketing, and Education.

2.3 Physical Description

The Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area (see Figure 2) contains approximately 30 islands with a surface area of 1,600 acres. The islands are glacial drumlins formed about 16,000 years ago. They range in size from 214 acres to less than an acre of bare-rock outcroppings. These islands are spread out over 50 square miles in Boston Harbor. The furthestmost island, The Graves, is about 10 miles from Boston.

There are seasonal visitor centers or information kiosks at Fort Warren on George's Island, Long Wharf in downtown Boston, Hingham Shipyard, and Lynn Heritage State Park. The six main islands that are open for public visitation are not connected to the mainland. The only mode of access is by boat.

Figure 2. Boston Harbor



2.4 Mission and Goals of the National Park Area

According to Park staff, when Congress designated the Boston Harbor Islands National Recreation Area in 1996, the NPS was not authorized to acquire lands and historic features that illustrate the significant role of the Boston Harbor Islands in the nation's history. From this directive, NPS sees its mission at the Park:

- To preserve for public use and enjoyment the lands and waters that comprise the Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area;
- To manage the recreation area in partnership with the private sector, the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, municipalities surrounding Massachusetts and Cape Cod Bays, the Thompson Island Outward Bound Education Center, and Trustees of Reservations, and with historical, business, cultural, civic, recreational and tourism organizations;
- To improve access to the Boston Harbor Islands through the use of public water transportation; and
- To provide educational and visitor information programs to increase public understanding of and appreciation for the natural and cultural resources of the Boston Harbor Islands, including the history of Native American use and involvement.

The consensus of the Partnership is that the major objective of the Park is the protection of resources. It has not yet set limitations on the use of the islands, but will soon start a process for setting carrying capacity based on a scientific monitoring of resources and visitor use. Above all else, the partnership sees the islands as a living laboratory of coastal processes, and a teaching tool for future generations to learn how to care for our world in ways that are sustainable over time.

2.5 Visitation Levels and Visitor Profile

Visitation was estimated at approximately 115,000 in 1998. This visitation is based on ridership on Park-sponsored ferry services and counts of private boats. About 80 percent of these visitors (92,500) arrived by ferry, while the remainder (22,500) arrived by private boats. About 19 percent of the visitors used the water shuttle services from George's Island to access Lovell's, Bumpkin, Gallop's, and Grape Islands. Visitation in 1997 was slightly higher at about 120,000 with similar distribution of arrival mode. Some projections indicate that visitation could increase five-fold over the next 10 years, although this is dependent on significantly increased levels of ferry service. Additional studies are needed to establish both the economic viability of increased service and the resource impacts of higher visitation levels.

A 1997 visitor survey indicated that 80 percent of the visitors to the Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area are from Massachusetts, and the remaining 20 percent are from outside the State. The survey also showed that 30 percent were first-time visitors, 34 percent had made one prior visit to the Park, and 37 percent had made more than two visits.

■ 3.0 Existing Conditions, Issues and Concerns

3.1 Transportation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Between June and October, there are three regularly scheduled ferry services between the mainland and George's Island (see Figure 3): from Long Wharf in downtown Boston, from Hewitt's Cove in Hingham, and from Heritage State Park in Lynn. In addition, there is an interisland water shuttle service provided free of charge to visitors on George's Island.

Long Wharf Service. Ferries, which leave from downtown Boston every hour from 10:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. during the summer, take visitors to George's Island, where free water shuttles stop on continuous circuits of the islands that are staffed. Passenger ferries operate from Long Wharf, Boston to George's Island, about a 45-minute ride. Approximately 80 percent of the visitors to the Boston Harbor Islands currently leave from Long Wharf. The round-trip ferry costs \$8.00 for adults, \$6.00 for children under 12, and \$7.00 for seniors. The boats for this service can carry between 250 to 550 passengers.

Hingham Service. Three trips depart and return daily from Hewitt's Cove in Hingham. The one-way trip time is about one hour, and the boats do make interim stops at some islands between Hingham and George's Island. The boat for this service can carry 150 passengers.

Lynn Service. There is one round trip a day on weekends between Heritage State Park in Lynn and George's Island. The boat leaves at 10:00 a.m. and returns at 5:00 p.m. The boats for this service can carry 49 passengers.

Water Shuttle Service. During the peak season, there are two water shuttle loops that operate between 11:00 a.m. and 4:40 p.m. with island stops once an hour. The water shuttle service is timed to depart George's Island shortly after ferries from Long Wharf arrive so those visitors can make convenient transfers.

All of the ferry services are unreserved, but they rarely filled to capacity. On rare occasions, ferry service may be interrupted because of poor weather.

The State contracts for, but does not subsidize the ferry service. Originally, there were multiple vendors, but now there is just one contracted vendor providing the service. The contract is due to end in about a year. They are currently working on new contract terms for a contract that will last three to five years, and are considering re-instituting a multiple vendor arrangement. They are also considering integrating the Boston Harbor Islands service shuttle into the regular harbor passenger commuter service system.

Recently, there have been two transportation-related initiatives at the Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area. These are:

1. The Park has received a grant from the Department of Energy for developing alternative fueled vehicles on Spectacle Island. This is a sustainable development initiative. The Park plans to use this money to operate electric vehicles on the island, and an electric boat for the island. The grant is for \$500,000 for two years.
2. The dock on Peddock's Island has recently been rebuilt to make it completely ADA accessible. The total cost of this renovation was more than \$2 million.

Congestion is not seen as a major transportation issue. The capacity and configuration of the transportation system allows the Park managers to balance demand with the carrying capacity of the facilities. The more pressing transportation concerns include dedicated mainland access points; new vessels, development of Spectacle Island, expanded ferry service, ADA accessibility, and better mainland signage. These issues are discussed in further detail below:

Mainland Access Issues

Currently, the mainland access points to the Boston Harbor Islands are owned and controlled by the ferry service contractor. Although this arrangement has been adequate to date, the Park would like to establish permanent mainland access points so that even if the contractor changes in the future, the general public will continue to access the Boston Harbor Islands from the same location. The Partnership summarizes this plan by stating:

“Mainland docking facilities need to be reserved on a long-term basis. The ferry terminals need to have long-term arrangements so that docking facilities are available for authorized island ferry and water shuttle providers. This will provide Park visitors with assurance that terminals remain in the same location over long periods of time.”

The Park intends these permanent mainland access points to be truly intermodal connections where visitors can easily transfer from buses, subways, trains and/or private automobiles to the ferry services to the islands. These permanent access points could also serve as initial informational and interpretive centers for Park visitors. These permanent access points will have new universally accessible piers. Adequate parking for private automobiles as well as school and tour buses need to be provided at appropriate mainland access points.

New Vessels

The Park would like new passenger vessels to be put into service that could be dedicated to Boston Harbor Islands use, regardless of the contractor operating the service. These vessels would have many enhanced features including:

- Low wake and wash;
- Marked as Park vessels for easy recognition;
- On-board interpretive displays;
- Modern passenger amenities;

- Powered by alternative fuels; and
- ADA accessible.

Spectacle Island

A central element of the GMP will be the recommendation to develop Spectacle Island as the new main visitor center for the Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area. Under this plan, Spectacle Island will become the first stop-off point for most visitors to the Park. The island is currently being expanded with fill removed from the Central Artery highway project in downtown Boston. Spectacle Island will become the focal point from which people can start their island experience. A new, state-of-the-art visitor center and marina for ferries and private boats on the island, is being built as part of the Central Artery mitigation.

Expanded Ferry Service

In addition to the development of Spectacle Island, the Park would like to create a new expanded ferry service network that would make more islands accessible to the general public. This plan will require:

- Improving or establishing major dock facilities on more islands. On some of the smaller islands, the Park plans to develop minor dock facilities for use by private boats and/or water shuttles.
- Redesigning the ferry routes, including more mainland access points and more inter-island water shuttle service.
- Expanding the hours of service.

The Boston Harbor Island Partnership recognizes that it will have to be creative in financing this new, expanded ferry service. The Partnership wants to ensure that ferry service remains as affordable as possible, so that no one is excluded from the Park because of the price of the ferry. The Partnership is exploring funding tools to allow private sector financial support of water shuttles. It is also considering a plan to set up a fund using \$1.00 of the ticket price to go into a fund to subsidize the interisland water shuttle. However, it is likely that additional funds will be necessary to implement the full expansion of ferry service as the Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area is developed.

ADA Accessibility

The Park plans to make all vessels and piers universally accessible according to the guidelines of the Americans with Disabilities Act. Many of the islands are unimproved and may create mobility barriers for some visitors. In those cases, the Park would like to be able to provide vehicles for mobility-impaired people.

Piers

The condition of the piers on islands varies greatly. At this time improvements are needed to at least two piers, with the potential need for four new piers to open up additional islands.

Better Mainland Signage

The Park would like to improve signage on the mainland that directs visitors to the island access points. This will include improvements to and increases in the number of highway signs, as well as installing signs at public transportation facilities and pedestrian-scale signs along streets leading to the mainland access points. All of these signs will generate awareness of the BHI, as well as facilitate its access.

3.2 Community Development Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area is located at the heart of a large, urbanized area with an economy based on high-tech industries, financial services, and higher education. As such, the Park has a negligible impact on the local economy.

The planned improvements to Boston Harbor Islands fit into an overall strategy to promote tourism in the region. The expectation is that the development of the National Park Area will induce visitors who are already coming to the Boston area to extend their stays for an extra half to full day.

Many of the adjacent communities see the National Park Area as an economic advantage, and would like to become gateway communities also. Salem, Quincy, Dorchester, Hull, and others may become gateway points to the National Park Area in the future.

3.3 Natural or Cultural Resource Conditions, Issues and Concerns

The Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area is rich in both natural and cultural resources, and a prime mission of the Park is to preserve these resources and educate the public about their importance. The islands are listed on the National Register of Historic Places as an Archaeological District because they have important remains from prehistoric use. The Park offers a wide range of educational and interpretive programs, including guided slide shows and tours of natural and cultural resources.

Figure 3. George’s Island Pier



3.4 Recreation Conditions, Issues and Concerns

Visitors to the Boston Harbor Islands can take advantage of a large number of recreational activities including: hiking, exploring historical structures and ruins, bird watching, boating, fishing, picnicking, beachcombing, swimming, and camping by permit. Most of the islands have no amenities.

■ 4.0 Planning and Coordination

4.1 Unit Plans

The Boston Harbor Islands General Management Plan is currently being developed, and is due out in spring 2000. This plan will describe the kinds of visitor facilities that may be built and how they will be used. It will also address transportation access to the islands. The Park staff provided some of the highlights of the transportation sections of the draft GMP. The Park's transportation needs focus on water transportation and landside access to water transportation access points.

4.2 Public and Agency Coordination

The Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area is a partnership of federal, state, local, and private entities. As one member of the Boston Harbor Islands Partnership, the NPS works closely with other partners in the management of the park area.

■ 5.0 Assessment of Need

5.1 Magnitude of Need

Alternative Transportation has significant potential to increase usage of the Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area. Through their planning efforts, the partnership has identified a number of transportation-related needs that they would like to address in the coming years. These include:

- A dedicated “mainland side” dock facility with permanent ticketing, waiting, and information space. These would be located on piers that are reserved on a long-term basis so that there is continuity of service with potential changes of boat operators.
- Good connections between mainland access points and public transportation services.
- Additional visitor parking facilities at one or more of the mainland access points.
- Continuation of the free interisland shuttle with a dedicated and predictable funding source.
- Upgrading transportation facilities to ADA Accessibility standards.
- Uniform and clear signage directing visitors to the mainland access points, regardless of whether the visitors are coming by private automobile or public transportation. This includes signage on major arteries and at transit stations.
- Expanded ferry service that could include additional hours of service, increases in the frequency of service between ferry stops, and increases in the number of ferry stops. Currently, a single vendor provides service. Multiple vendors may represent enhanced services/opportunities for expansion. This will be essential when the new Visitor Center opens on Spectacle Island, potentially doubling the overall visitor capacity of the islands.
- Potential for independent on-call water shuttle service.

5.2 Feasible Alternatives

Feasible transportation alternatives that could address the needs of the Boston Harbor Islands National Park Area, and that fall within the definition of ATS in this study include:

- Expanded ferry service including more departure points, increased operating frequency, specialized routes serving only certain islands and landside facilities;
- Increased number of gateways with connections to mainland transportation facilities; Salem and Quincy are two cities with National Historic sites that have expressed an active interest in connecting their parks with the Harbor Islands;
- Improved water shuttle services including better information, more frequent service and improved coordination of ferry and water shuttle schedules;
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- Detailed planning studies to determine the economic viability of alternative ferry and water shuttle service configurations, as well as the desired carrying capacity on each island.

■ 6.0 Bibliography

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■ 7.0 Persons Interviewed

George Price, NPS, Superintendent Boston Harbor Island National Park Area

Sarah Peskin, National Park Service

Bob Holzheimer, National Park Service

Barbara Mackey, National Park Service

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Kathy Abbott, Island Alliance

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